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RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM PRIORITY 6029
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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XXXX
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA

CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Mideast

Key stories in the media:

Leading media quoted PM Ehud Olmert as saying on Wednesday that he is prepared to talks with enemies. However, Olmert was quoted as saying that Hamas is not ready to talk with Israel. Yediot

disclosed part of the discussion held during trilateral talks on Monday, in particular PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas's allegations that Olmert has not kept previous promises and he attacked Abbas's connection with Hamas. Hatzofe reported that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had wanted to discuss the final

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status of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations during the three-way talks on Monday, but that President Bush ruled that the sides should first talk about the cessation of terror and recognition of Israel.

Ha'aretz and Israel Radio reported that, ahead of the meeting of principal Quartet negotiators that took place in Berlin on Wednesday, Secretary Rice underlined international demands that any Palestinian government recognize Israel and renounce violence. Citing AP, Ha'aretz reported that the meeting's host, German FM Frank-Walter Steinmeier, cautioned against building unrealistic expectations for the US-backed push for peace.

In an expanded lead story, Ha'aretz reported that the Syrian armed forces are being strengthened in an unprecedented way in recent memory with the help of generous funding from Iran. The Syrians are bolstering their forces in all areas except the air force, which has been believed to be weak for some time. The main emphasis of the efforts has been missiles and long-range rockets to compensate for the weak air force. According to Ha'aretz, the Syrian navy, after years of neglect, is also being reinforced with an Iranian version of a Chinese anti-ship missile, similar to the one used by Hizbullah during the second Lebanon war to strike the Israeli destroyer INS Hanit. In addition to the overall strengthening of the armed forces in Syria, there has been a redeployment of forces along the front lines. Ha'aretz wrote that Damascus is close to concluding a multi-million dollar deal to buy modern anti-tank missiles from Russia. Ha'aretz said it appears that the Syrians have moved forces closer to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights. Speaking on

Israel Radio this morning, Amos Gilad, head of the political-military department at the Defense Ministry, said that Syria's apparent arming does not point to bellicose intentions against Israel in the near future. Israel Radio quoted a Syrian MP as saying that nothing has changed along the Syria-Israel border, that Syria is ready for anything, and that Israel will pay a heavy price should it do something "stupid."

The Jerusalem Post: reported that incoming Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi told reporters on Wednesday that the IDF may have to stop Hizbullah from rearming. On the other hand leading media quoted him as saying that Hizbullah is still far away from rehabilitation. Citing news agency stories, Ha'aretz reported that on Wednesday Olmert rebuffed assessments that Hizbullah had recovered from last year's war with Israel, saying UN Peacekeepers and the Lebanese army were keeping the guerrilla group in check. Ha'aretz reported that the Lebanese Army fired anti-aircraft weapons at Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles flying over Tyre slightly after 10 A.M. on Wednesday, while Israeli warplanes flew over south Lebanon.

Israel Radio reported that the International Atomic Energy Agency is expected to announce that Iran has sped up its uranium-enrichment process. The Jerusalem Post quoted Olmert as saying on Wednesday that "serious chances" remain for a non-military solution to the Iranian problem.

Leading media reported that on Wednesday in Jenin border policemen killed Mahmoud Abu Obeid, the dispatcher of the would-be suicide bomber apprehended in Rishon Lezion.

Yediot quoted British PM Tony Blair as saying on Wednesday that the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians can also be promoted through moderate elements within Hamas. Blair was addressing the British Parliament shortly before his 10 Downing St. meeting with Abbas. The Jerusalem Post reported that Abbas told Blair that he will handle negotiations with Israel, not the PA government.

Ha'aretz reported that on Wednesday Hamas leader Khaled Mashal arrived on a surprise visit to Egypt, where he is expected to meet with local leaders. The newspaper quoted Palestinian sources

assaying that he will discuss a deal to release abducted IDF soldier Cpl. Gilad Shalit. Ha'aretz reported that Physicians for Human Rights-Israel (PHR) has appealed to human rights organizations in Lebanon with a request to obtain information about the Israeli soldiers who were abducted last summer. Ha'aretz said that the appeal is unusual, since PHR usually acts on behalf of Palestinians being held by Israel in particular.

Leading media reported that on Tuesday Egypt arrested a Palestinian who was allegedly planning terror attacks against Israelis in Sinai. The man, who crossed into Egypt from Gaza, intended to travel to southern Sinai resorts popular with Israelis. He led investigators to two accomplices. It is not known whether any of the three belong to a terror organization. Ha'aretz reported that Egyptian security sources told a French news service on Wednesday that the first suspect crossed the border via an underground tunnel, and that he was wearing an explosive belt at the time of his arrest. His accomplices were supposed to transport him to southern Sinai. Yediot said that the arrest was an Egyptian achievement in the war against terror.

The Jerusalem Post reported that Peace Now Secretary-General Yariv Oppenheimer told the newspaper on Wednesday that the construction of 3,000 new housing units now under way in the West Bank has made it hard to enact a two-state solution.

Maariv reported that senior Labor Party leaders threatened to split the party if Amir Peretz is reelected party chairman. The media reported that on Wednesday oligarch Arkady Gaidamak announced the establishment of new social movement -- "Social Justice" -- instead of a new political party, as had been expected. The media quoted Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu as saying in Paris on Wednesday that there is no political alliance between him and Gaidamak.

Yediot reported that Japan plans to build an airfield in Jericho accommodating cargo planes transporting agricultural produce and planes carrying Japanese tourists to Jericho and the Dead Sea area.

Ha'aretz reported that on Wednesday the Knesset plenum approved by 24 to 6 the first reading of a bill to establish an academy for the Arabic language, similar to the Academy of the Hebrew Language that was created in 1953. According to the bill, which is sponsored by Labor-Meimad MKs Michael Melchior, Chairman of the Education Committee, and MK Nadia Hilou, the aim of the academy is "to direct the development of Arabic on the basis of research into all aspects and periods of the language."

The media reported that Attorney General Menachem Mazuz has set May 2 as the date for the hearing of Israeli President Moshe Katsav in the sexual misconduct affair of which he is accused.

Hatzofe quoted the CEO of Intel-Israel, Alex Kornhauser, as saying on Tuesday that substantial tax cuts could prevent the closure of Intel's Jerusalem plant.

A poll conducted by Channel 10-TV on Wednesday found that a party headed by Gaidamak would receive 14 mandates, three more than Olmert's Kadima. The poll also found that Likud would receive 27 mandates, Labor 14, National Union-National Religious Party 10, Shas 10, Yisrael Beiteinu 8, and the Arab parties 10.

Maariv and The Jerusalem Post displayed the results of a Conrad Adenauer Foundation poll conducted in Israel according to which 75 percent of Israelis are interested in Israel joining the EU. However, only 11 percent would leave Israel for Europe if they were citizens of an EU country. The US and Germany are the Israelis' favorite Western countries, whereas France is the least loved one.

Mideast:

Summary:

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "The Bush administration's main contribution, under Rice's leadership, has been to root the idea of the

Palestinian state in the international mind, and in the shaping of that state's future borders."

Chief Economic Editor Sever Plotker wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot: "How is it possible that a seventh-rate terror organization, the leaders of which have long since been assassinated, can succeed in concealing a kidnapped Israeli soldier somewhere within the recesses of the Gaza Strip?"

Block Quotes:

I. "A Kind Word For Condoleezza"

Diplomatic correspondent Aluf Benn wrote in the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (2/22): "People who spoke to United States Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during her visit this week were

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impressed by her determination to invest the remainder of her tenure

in promoting a 'two-state solution' for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.... She wants an achievement that can be chalked up to her credit.... Even though she does not talk about this in public, she sees putting an end to the occupation and the establishment of a Palestinian state as a moral imperative. In closed conversations, Rice has used imagery from the racist American South where she grew up. But with no connection to her motivations, Rice's activity is welcome.... Contrary to popular opinion, which accuses the administration of US President George W. Bush of shoulder-shrugging, if not neglect, Bush has done a great deal to create conditions for a future agreement.... The Bush administration's main contribution, under Rice's leadership, has been to root the idea of the Palestinian state in the international mind, and in the shaping of that state's future borders. The previous administrations tended to grumble about the Jewish settlements in the territories as an 'obstacle to peace,' but did very little to stop them.... This week Rice learned that in the Middle East there aren't good guys and bad guys, and that any alliance is good for its moment. The moderates of yesterday join up with extremists today, as in the Mecca Agreement between Abbas and Hamas leader Khaled Mashal. One can guess that Rice was angry at Abbas, but she wiped the spit off her face and promised that she would be back soon for another round of visits. And if only for this, she deserves a kind word, even if it is hard for her to show real results."

II. "Why Do They Still Have Gilad Shalit?"

Chief Economic Editor Sever Plotker wrote in the mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (2/22): "How is it possible that a seventh-rate terror organization, the leaders of which have long since been assassinated, can succeed in concealing a kidnapped Israeli soldier somewhere within the recesses of the Gaza Strip, without the long arm of the security services being able to reach him?... What happened to the billions invested in the most advanced surveillance techniques and in creating the most reliable network of agents?.... The fact that Israel, the military-security empire, has not succeeded so far in releasing Gilad Shalit from his kidnappers, is not only a stain on its ethos as a state that always brings its combatant sons home. It is also a sign of the weakness of the security and intelligence services and an erosion of the professional abilities of the special military units. Our enemies have taken note of this. Today, the IDF should not be tempted into a showy operation, which would only endanger the life of the kidnapped soldier. At present, diplomacy is preferable -- but on condition that those who use it know how to employ it. And with us, that too is no longer certain."

JONES